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Senate can't resurrect primary

Dems refusal to give bill immediate effect prevents Jan. 15 vote

By CHARLIE CAIN
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LANSING — Michigan lawmakers failed Thursday in their attempt to save Michigan's endangered Jan. 15 presidential primary.

The Senate voted 26-9 on a bill to restore the primary in a way that could pass legal muster with a judge who this week declared the law establishing the primary unconstitutional. But Democrats refused to vote for a companion procedural mo-

tion to give the bill "immediate effect." And without that, the bill cannot become law until around March 1 of next year — long after the proposed primary vote.

The bill's sponsor, Sen. Michelle McMannus, conceded that without immediate effect the primary is all but dead. She blamed Democrats and their union allies who want party caucuses, rather than a primary.

Caucuses likely would work to the favor of former North Carolina Sen. John

Edwards, who has powerful friends in organized labor, because unions would have a better chance of controlling caucuses than a primary in which anyone who requested a Democratic ballot could vote.

"These guys want to do it behind closed doors, they want political bosses to decide who their presidential candidate is," she said.

Democratic caucuses likely would attract around 100,000 voters, while a pro-

jected one million would be expected to vote in a Democratic primary.

New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton has a substantial lead among likely Michigan primary voters. Her name remains on the ballot, but the other leading Democrats, including Edwards, have taken their names off because the date violates the national party's pre-set calendar. Those advocating an early primary

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 SEN. MICHELLE MCMANUS



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say it would give Michigan a greater voice in the selection of both parties' nominees.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, R-Rochester, had urged his colleagues during Senate debate to vote to restore the primary.

"If you don't support immediate effect, you have destroyed our opportunity to have a presidential primary on Jan. 15," he said. "Make us relevant in this (nominating) process."

It was unclear Thursday evening whether the Democratic-controlled House would take up the bill.

If the House passes the legislation with the needed two-thirds vote for immediate effect, the Senate could reconsider it next Tuesday, when lawmakers tentatively are scheduled to meet.

House Speaker Andy Dillon, D-Redford Township, said Thursday afternoon he didn't know if there were enough House votes to approve a presidential primary measure.

Michigan Republican Party Chairman Saul Anuzis said the Senate "took the right step to re-establish" the primary, and urged House Democrats to quickly pass the primary legislation.

GOP spokesman Bill Nowling said the Senate vote was troublesome.

"I think we can still pull off a Jan. 15 primary," he said. "With the Senate vote, we got half a loaf, so we'll take that and keep moving forward. We're just in limbo at the time being."

Republicans say a presidential primary remains their first option. But if the primary fails to win legislative support, Republicans would likely hold a statewide presidential nominating convention on Jan. 25 and 26. Between 3,000 and 5,000 party activists would likely participate in a GOP convention.

Debbie Dingell, a Michigan member of the Democratic Na-

tional Committee, worked feverishly to round up votes for the primary. And she said Thursday it isn't dead.

"Not yet," she said. "We're still moving forward on the legal side and the Legislature may come back next week and could take it up."

If the primary isn't held, Dingell said the fallback plan is to hold a Democratic caucus the same day as New Hampshire's primary, which will take place in early January — although the date has not yet been set.

"I want the primary because I think it's the right thing," Dingell said. "But I'd still be happy if we have a caucus on the same day as New Hampshire."

The primary law was struck down Wednesday by Ingham County Circuit Judge William Collette. He said it was unconstitutional since it would have allowed the lists of voters who took part in the primary to go only to the Democratic and Republican parties. He said the Legislature would have had to give the law, approved in August, a two-thirds vote to allow the spending of public money to benefit a private interest, in this case the political parties. The law didn't have two-thirds support.

In other developments on Thursday, the national Republican Party, as expected, said it will punish five states — including Michigan — for scheduling nominating contests before Feb. 5. It said Michigan would lose half of its delegates to next summer's nominating convention.

But GOP Michigan Chairman Anuzis said he took that as an idle threat.

"I remain confident that all of Michigan's 60 national delegates will be seated next year in Minneapolis-St. Paul," he said. The "action by the RNC was expected and, while disappointing, it is just one part of along process toward the convention next September."

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